

INTRODUCTION

all the truth of life is there
— Joseph Conrad

WENDY WALKER IS THAT RARE, REAL BEING : an unwaveringly literary person. Let me start with that one assertion ; I will make an even bolder assertion in a moment and this introduction will demonstrate that the two form an equation. I describe Ms. Walker with these words not because she is author of a modern masterpiece, *The Secret Service* (Sun & Moon Classics, 1992), and the formally innovative *Blue Fire, A Poetic Nonfiction* (Proteotypes, 2009), although each of these books is a substantial accomplishment. Nor do I use the term because of her bold work-in-progress, *Sexual Stealing*, an ongoing exploration of the origins of British Gothic fiction in eighteenth-century Jamaica and Haiti. No, I do so in strict accuracy, because she is a reader and writer of unflinching perspicacity for whom literature is as necessary and integral to existence as breathing. As writers do, she thinks about her readings in writing. *My Man and other Critical Fictions* gathers some of this literary thinking.

A critical fiction is a piece of fiction or poetry where form (story) and content (critical function) are inseparable, a work of art that explicitly declares itself as a critique of another work of literature and explicitly makes use of that earlier source text. All fiction is critical fiction, in that all writers are — whether consciously or not — responding to the traditions and readings that have shaped their thinking. The critical fiction distinguishes itself by making this critical function its central concern. This offers an approach to material otherwise resistant to ordinary criticism, and an opportunity to make something

new and unexpected happen. The critical fiction is best seen as a mode of thinking or a way of reading rather than a fixed form because each text will propose — or demand — its own literary strategy. It is as old as literature itself: Walker has written that *Don Quixote* is “the longest and greatest critical fiction, which takes as its target the entire chivalric tradition.” Think, too, of the unravelling critique of pedagogical manuals and sermons (and storytelling itself) that is *Tristram Shandy*. Recent scholarship by Thomas Dilworth has identified Shakespeare’s poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” as the source text for Keats’ critical fiction, his “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Other antecedents of the critical fiction are the acerbic “Reviews of Unwritten Books” (1903-4) of Frederick Rolfe, notable for upending chronology and causality in their collisions of author and incident, such as “Machiavelli’s Despatches from the South African Campaign” or “Herodotus’ History of England.” More recently, Paul Metcalf was a pioneer of literary collage whose *Collected Works* (3 vols., Coffee House Press, 1997) contain many pieces that do what the critical fiction does, but with events and texts from his chosen field of American history.

In the direct line of the critical fiction, three names must be mentioned. The first is Jorge Luis Borges, whose densely layered work in *Labyrinths* and *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952* (both 1964) defines the form by example, and also illuminates how the critical fiction differs from the essay or metafiction (he was a master of those forms as well). “The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald,” “The Dream of Coleridge,” “Kafka and His Precursors,” and “A Problem” (on *Don Quixote*) are key texts. The second is Jean Rhys, whose *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a swift, sharp novel enriched by the author’s childhood on the island of Dominica — one person’s magical realism is another’s daily reality. It is also, indisputably, a critical fiction. From the fire that consumes Coulibri in Antoinette’s childhood and the manipulations of her step-brother Richard Mason, the narrative moves inextricably into the text of *Jane Eyre*. Elements and incidents of the Brontë novel — fire, full moon, moths, “when I felt her teeth in my arm,” gin, and above all, money — are so deeply threaded into the vocabulary of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that to experience its terrible conclusion is to walk the corridors of Thornfield Hall with new awareness. I record these two names because the third name in this direct line is Wendy Walker, whose sustained literary output over the past three decades is of the same stature as the work of Borges and Rhys.

Walker's early collections of short fiction, *The Sea-Rabbit* (1988) and *Stories out of Omarie* (1995), are feminist examinations of fairy tales and mediaeval love stories that push at boundaries and preconceptions. Her novel *The Secret Service* charts an international conspiracy against the British monarchy in an alternate nineteenth century. With its central conceit, that the spies of the eponymous Secret Service can transform themselves into objects, Walker creates rich and subtle displays of how mind and perception are dependent upon the form of their container. The experiences of the two principal women characters, the young girl recruited as a spy, and the princess imprisoned in a tower, are an interrogation of literary conventions. In *Blue Fire*, Walker constructed a poetic nonfiction to explore that ambiguous space surrounding Constance Kent, one of the central (and most elusive) figures connected with the Great Crime of 1860. No customary literary form proved sufficiently resilient for this material, so she adopted literary techniques not unlike those used by Paul Metcalf.

Walker is the sort of reader who seems to make out the essential point, at once. With her husband, author Tom La Farge, Walker directs the publishing side of the Proteus Gowanus Gallery/Reading Room in Brooklyn. She spends the winter months in a Latin American hill town. You've heard its name, Sulaco. She writes and speaks with the imperturbable and mature calmness of an expert in possession of the facts, and her thinking is clear sunshine. In *The Secret Service*, the head of the team of spies, the Corporal, records in his memoirs (unpublished and burned as soon as written) an alarming incident in a jungle clearing. He concludes, "I have never had an answer to a question before now, if that woman has given me an answer." The critical fiction enables Walker to ask questions of literary texts that provoke responses as revealing and previously unsuspected as that given the Corporal; or, as she wrote elsewhere in the novel, "to compel a reweaving of visible reality."

I have chosen an epigram from Conrad's *Preface* intentionally, and elements from his writings pepper this introduction, for he is an author with whose work Walker engages repeatedly. Conrad once wrote that Marlow "was the only man of us who still 'followed the sea.'" More than any other living writer, Wendy Walker is the only one of us who still follows the words.

— Henry Wessells

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

all the truth of life is there : Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. Preface (1902).

longest and greatest critical fiction : Borges Walker Wessells, <http://criticalfiction.net/wordpress/?p=160> (June 2011). The website constitutes an extended discussion of the critical fiction form and includes an annotated reading list.

Recent scholarship : Thomas Dilworth, “Keats’s Shakespeare” *TLS*, 22 April 2011, p. 15.

Frederick Rolfe’s “Reviews of Unwritten Books”. Edited and with notes by Donald Weeks. 4 vols., Tragara Press, 1985-8.

that ambiguous space : Wendy Walker, *The Secret Service*, p. 348.

an answer : *The Secret Service*, p. 46.

You’ve heard its name, Sulaco : Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*.

imperturbable and mature calmness : Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*.

still follows the sea : Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

